

The Tears of the Poor: John Glasse, Christian Socialist (1848-1918)*

MICHAEL A. McCABE, M.A., M.Th., Ph.D., B.D.

Introduction: Social Heretic?

John Glasse, minister of Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh from 1877 to 1909, was a Socialist. Rooted in the intellectual milieu of his own times, Glasse's Socialism was a classic expression of late Victorian Socialist revivalism and as such drew on the varieties of Socialist thought then current. In addition, it drew upon, and was an attempt to reinterpret, the social vision of the Scottish Reformed tradition. It is important to appreciate that Glasse understood Socialism to be a genuine expression of Christian social teaching in general and of the Knoxian social ideal in particular (Socialism was the application of Reformed Christian principles to the industrial age). So Glasse was able with sincerity and conviction to describe himself as a Christian-Socialist. He was a Socialist *because* he was a Christian.

A kenspeckle figure in the Socialist revival in late Victorian Scotland and a prominent minister in the Established Church, Glasse is all but forgotten today; his contribution to Kirk and Labour ignored. Although cited in almost all the important secondary works that deal with the Scottish churches and the rise of Labour Glasse failed to get an entry of his own in the recent *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (1993). This omission would not have surprised or upset him. Indeed it is fitting testimony to his views and beliefs.

At the end of his biography of John Knox (1905) Glasse declared that the "idea of individual salvation peculiar to Evangelicalism" had had its day.¹ Christians must now recognise that the welfare of humanity could not be secured, nor the Church's duty realised, apart from other people: "we are bound together in the common bundle of

* This paper is based on a number of primary and secondary sources readily available in the National Library of Scotland and in New College Library, Edinburgh. Thanks to Prof. S.J. Brown, who commented on an earlier draft of the piece, and to Linda J. Dunbar for thoughts on content and presentation.

¹ J. Glasse, *John Knox: A Criticism and an Appreciation* (London, 1905), 183.

life".² The Church of Scotland, he said, had only to associate the Word of God with the cause of truth, and the Kingdom of God with the welfare of humanity to be "in perfect sympathy" with Knox's social ideals.³ Quoting Carlyle on Knox, Glasse said that though Knox could be narrow-minded his vision of a godly commonwealth was "devout imagination still".⁴ In an age of corruption and hypocrisy Knox had stood-up for honesty, fidelity and sincerity. He had "strengthened the feeble knees and made straight paths for the common people".⁵ He had taught the beauty of holiness and the dignity of humanity. He had preached liberty to the captive and that only righteousness can exalt a nation. Knox had striven "to make kings and priests" of all people.⁶ His legacy to Scotland was the example he set of integrity and fearlessness in the discharge of public duties:

The law of man had to yield with him to the truth of God, and no social conventions barred the way against moral principles.⁷

Glasse insisted that Socialism was a re-presentation of the social ethic of primitive Christianity and of the Knoxian social ideal which had itself claimed to look back to the pioneer Christians as exemplars.

However, Glasse was not merely extracting the social ethos of the Sermon on the Mount and calling it Socialism any more than was his friend James Keir Hardie.⁸ Both men believed that Socialism was, to borrow Alistair Kee's pithy phrase, "a moral system with economic implications"; that it was 'practical' Christianity for the modern age.⁹ This view of Socialism as practical Christianity was widely shared by

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 184-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁸ Cf. W. Knox. "Introduction". *Scottish Labour Leaders, 1918-1939: A Biographical Dictionary* (Edinburgh, 1984), 27.

⁹ A. Kee, "Better Songs to Sing – By the Rivers of Babylon" in *After Socialism? The Future of Radical Christianity*, ed. A.R. Morton (Edinburgh, 1994), 50.

Socialist revivalists who wanted to give old terms new meanings, new relevance, new energy and new life. It helps to explain why Glasse attempted to depict even Robert Owen as also in the tradition of Reformers who had struggled “to restore the primitive religion of Jesus.”¹⁰

By the standards of the Church of Scotland of his own day Glasse’s Socialism was eccentric. He exposed himself to the charge of lending support to atheists, revolutionists and “foreign” ideologies. He risked being accused of abusing the pulpit for political purposes. He could easily have been ignored by his fellow ministers and socially isolated from the middle class to which he belonged. Glasse was aware of these risks and so was determined to put the case for Socialism vigorously but constructively. Socialism was commonsense. Socialism was ethical. Socialism was a genuine expression of Christianity and so was eminently *respectable*. Thus although influenced by Marx, in his writings and speeches on Socialism in the 1900s Glasse emphasised the ethicism and anti-class war stance of the Independent Labour Party and of the Fabians, organisations he thought best represented Christian-Socialist ideals.

W.H. Marwick listed Glasse among the “social heretics” of the Scottish Churches, but it is important to remember that Glasse’s unorthodoxy was not such as to make him a radical *outsider*.¹¹ On the contrary, in his role as minister of Greyfriars kirk, his work on the Church of Scotland’s committees on Home Mission and on Social Work, his membership of the Freemasons and of the Edinburgh Liberal Club, and his desirable Edinburgh address (Tantallon Place), Glasse was so firmly anchored in middle-class culture that he was able to assure colleagues that his Socialism was Christian and sincere albeit rather odd.¹² In short, he fitted well into that diverse group of late Victorian and Edwardian radicals and social reformers who wanted to see the world turned upside down – but gently and

¹⁰ J.Glasse, *Robert Owen and His Life-Work* (London, 1900), 13.

¹¹ W.H. Marwick, “Social Heretics in the Scottish Churches”, *ante*, xi, pt. 3 (1953), 234.

¹² A short list of Glasse’s social activities, church work and club memberships appears in *Who Was Who, 1916-1928*, 411.

decently; who wanted to see society changed, but also to hang on to their comfortable lifestyles, domestic servants and posh houses.

Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss Glasse as no more than a harmless middle class windbag whose radicalism was compromised and blunted by ministry in the conservative Established Church. That would be to underestimate his notability as a representative figure of the late Victorian Socialist revival and the potency of the social gospel that that revival expressed. Besides, it cannot be emphasised enough that Glasse's *public* commitment to Socialism was highly unusual among ministers of the late Victorian Church of Scotland.

Activist

John Glasse was born in Auchtermuchty in 1848. He was educated at the local Free Church school then at St Andrews University and New College, Edinburgh. However, for reasons as yet undiscovered, he was licensed by the Established Church's presbytery of Edinburgh in 1876, became assistant minister at Greyfriars and then minister there from 1877. He stayed here until his retirement thirty two years later.¹³ He died in February, 1918.

In spite of his move from rural Fife to the hurly-burly of Edinburgh, Glasse never forgot his country roots.¹⁴ His Socialism retained something of the romantic and aesthetic critique of urban industrial society that Socialist revivalism inherited from radical Liberalism, and that may have harkened back to his Auchtermuchty boyhood. But he was not against cities or industrialism to the extent of sentimentalising the community values of rural life as Thomas Chalmers had done.¹⁵ Glasse knew that hardship and exploitation was generally the lot of agricultural labourers. For his contribution to Edward Carpenter's *Chants of Labour – A Song Book of the People*

¹³ A summary of Glasse's career: *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, ed. H. Scott (Edinburgh, 1915), i, 44.

¹⁴ Indeed in 1878 he had married the daughter of Auchtermuchty's Provost White. *ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. C.G. Brown, "'To be aglow with civic ardours': the Godly Commonwealth in Glasgow, 1843-1914", *ante*, xxvi (1996), 172-3.

(1888) Glasse wrote “A Harvest Hymn”.¹⁶ Set to the German Air “Wir pflügen und wir streuen” (“We plough the fields and scatter”) Glasse’s verses attacked the exploitation of farmworkers by landlords and bankers.¹⁷

If the corny lyrics of “A Harvest Hymn” had been Glasse’s sole contribution to the Socialist revival of the 1880s and 90s then he would best be forgotten. But, though little known as a songwriter, from the 1880s he established himself as a spokesman for Socialism in Edinburgh and further afield. He used his position as a minister and his status among Edinburgh’s middle class – then, as now, notorious in Scottish mythology for its preoccupation with gentility – to gain a hearing for Labour and Socialist causes. He wrote and lectured on social issues and publicly demonstrated commitment to Socialism by actually joining Socialist organisations.

There is some confusion about Glasse’s movements among the various – but always in terms of membership small – Socialist groups that sprang-up in Edinburgh between 1884 and 1914. This confusion is partially explained by the fact that, especially in the 1880s and 90s, ideological boundaries among Socialist groups in the city (as elsewhere) were blurred. Moreover, Socialists themselves were often mercurial, moving freely between different groups. They were often members of more than one Socialist organisation at the same time so

¹⁶ E. Carpenter, *Chants of Labour – A Song Book of the People* (London, 1922 edition), 86. Carpenter (1844-1929) achieved fame – and notoriety – as a Socialist sandal-weaving (and making) homosexual. He had been at one time a clerical Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge.

¹⁷ Verse two consists of the immortal lines:

“The Lords have now the vintage,
The bankers claim the corn,
The produce of the farmer
By craft and guile is torn
From both himself and household
To spend in court and hall
On minions and their masters
Who crowd to hunt and ball”.

groups' membership tended to overlap. So although Edinburgh's Socialist revival was diverse it was also "ecumenical".¹⁸

A variety of Marxist groups blossomed and faded in the years down to 1914. These tended to be dogmatic, inflexible and riven by factionalism and quarrels over theoretical niceties.¹⁹ By contrast, the Independent Labour Party (1893), while certainly not free of internal bickering, tended to be an open and ideologically flexible organisation. Partly because of this, by the eve of the First World War the alliance between the ILP and trades unions under the auspices of the Labour Party had come to dominate Socialism and Labour politics in the city.²⁰ (The ethical and anti-class war Socialism of mainstream ILP thinking was also endorsed by the Fabian Society which set up a new Edinburgh branch in 1907.²¹)

When John Glasse sought to defend and define his Socialism he was addressing himself not only to other Christians but also to the various Socialist groups that made up Edinburgh's Socialist movement, and to the debates about ideology and strategy that were taking place among these groups. He flourished in the ecumenical atmosphere of the Socialist revival but it was in the "broad church" of the ILP and in the Fabian Society that he was most at home.²² As with many other ILPers of the time the trajectory of his Socialism began with sympathy for radical Liberalism and moved through an association with Marxism before coming to rest in ILP ethicism and Fabian gradualism.

According to Marwick, Glasse was drawn to Socialist movement of the 1880s through an Edinburgh University Social Reform

¹⁸ D. Howell, *A Lost Left: Three Studies in Socialism and Nationalism* (Manchester, 1986), 20.

¹⁹ For an account of the activities of Socialist organisations in Edinburgh down to 1914 see J. Holford, *Reshaping Labour: Organisation, Work and Politics – Edinburgh in the Great War and After* (London, 1988), especially pp.147-51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

²¹ D.C. Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest: Social Criticism in the Scottish Church 1830-1945* (New York, 1987), 302.

²² Kenneth Morgan prefers the term "secular church". Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945-1951* (Oxford, 1985 edn.), 9.

Society.²³ He became a member of the Scottish Land and Labour League, a Marxist group (formed in 1884-5) focusing on land nationalisation and “reflecting thereby a dominant preoccupation of Scottish radicals”.²⁴

However, the Land and Labour League was disunited and fractious and Glasse left to join a splinter group, the Socialist League.²⁵ This group was also Marxist in orientation but here too Glasse seems to have found the dogmatism and theoretical disputes hard to take.

By the mid 1890s he had become closely connected with the Edinburgh branch of the ILP (founded in the same year as the national party, 1893). Glasse quickly became a friend and admirer of Keir Hardie entertaining him and other Socialists and trade unionists at Greyfriars manse when they were attending meetings in Edinburgh. For his part, Hardie praised Glasse’s work for the cause of Socialism and the working classes.²⁶

Glasse’s influence was also crucial in the establishment of the Christian Socialist Society, a small organisation in Scotland with only one active branch based in Glasgow. (The branch was formed in January 1887 following an address on Christian Socialism that Glasse had delivered to a Glasgow audience.²⁷) The Christian Socialist Society called for the transformation of capitalism through the public control of land, capital and the means of production, distribution and exchange²⁸ (as indeed had Hardie’s Scottish Labour Party [1888], a forerunner of the ILP).²⁹ However, the CSS disappeared after its official journal *The Christian Socialist* ceased publication in 1891.³⁰

²³ Marwick, “Social Heretics”, 234.

²⁴ Howell, *A Lost Left*, 20; Smith, *Passive Obedience*, 302.

²⁵ Smith, *Passive Obedience*, 302.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 303, n. 151.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 302, n. 148.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and of land and capital, was written into the constitution of the SLP (1888) and the ILP (1893). It became part of the Labour Party constitution in 1918 (“Clause IV”) because the architects of the Labour Party, Arthur Henderson and Sidney Webb, wanted to keep the ILP at the centre of the Labour movement. Until 1918 the Labour Party (so-

For as long as the *Christian Socialist* was issued Glasse was a frequent contributor, but he had no illusions about the difficulties of winning over his fellow Edinburgh ministers.³¹ Indeed as the editors of the *Christian Socialist* put it:

The [Edinburgh] clergy, almost without exception, do not seem to be troubled with any great aspirations after social welfare. A kind of blend of evangelical doctrine and teetotal living would, for the most part, pretty well satisfy them. Otherwise they seem to exist to pronounce a benediction on the *status quo*.³²

Still Glasse did not give up. In 1907 he became President of the newly formed Edinburgh branch of the Fabian Society³³ and ten years later he was a Vice-President of the Scottish Socialist Federation. (See below.)

Churchman

It was not difficult for John Glasse to become a prominent Christian-Socialist in late Victorian Scotland because there were hardly any. (The number of Socialist activists, Christian or otherwise, in Edinburgh before 1914 was never more than a few hundreds.) Moreover, relations between the Established Church in particular and Labour and Socialist organisations were marked by distrust.

Although a rapprochement between the Kirk and the Labour and Socialist movements was beginning to develop, in part based on the new “social theology” of the 1880s and 90s, there was nevertheless suspicion on both sides.³⁴ Few ministers were prepared to endorse or

called in 1906 following the election of twenty-nine Labour Representation Committee candidates to parliament) was a *federation* of affiliated trades unions, and Socialist and Co-operative societies. The ILP was one such affiliated society and down to 1918 was the main route for individual entry to the Labour Party.

³⁰ Smith, *Passive Obedience*, 302, n. 148.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 302.

³² *Ibid.*, 302, n. 150.

³³ *Ibid.*, 302.

³⁴ See A.C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk: Victorian Scotland's Religious Revolution* (Edinburgh, 1983), especially ch. 5 “The Social Revolution”, 110-56;

get involved publicly with Socialism which they tended to associate with hostility to organised religion. For their part, Socialists were not convinced that the Church of Scotland would ever be anything but a tool of the ruling class and a champion of capitalism. Indeed leading Socialists argued that Socialism was the fulfilment of an ailing institutional Christianity.³⁵ They were reluctant to lend support to the Church because they thought it was decaying along with the economic system to which, they argued, it had become captive.³⁶ In these circumstances Glasse's public commitment to Socialism was exceptional and courageous.

It is true that during the nineteenth century the Established Church had hitched its star to the *laissez-faire* doctrines of political economy, but that it should continue in this way was neither necessary nor inevitable. Towards the end of the century a growing number of churchmen became highly critical of *laissez-faire* individualism.³⁷ They sought to engage theologically with the social and economic thinking of radical Liberals, trades unionists and Socialists, and thence to channel the radical Presbyterian impulse that had given rise to the communitarian experiments of, for instance, Thomas Chalmers in a yet more clearly collectivist direction. D.C. Smith and others have rightly pointed out that from the 1890s, through the general Assembly, the Kirk became involved in social issues in a way that signalled a shift in the emphasis of its social teaching. So, for example, the general Assembly agreed to sponsor several national

C.G. Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland since 1730* (London, 1987), esp. pp.184-94. A new edition of this book entitled *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* has been published by Edinburgh University Press (1997), but Brown's views on the "social question" and the crisis for religion have changed little.

³⁵ M.A. McCabe, "'On Jordan's Stormy Banks': Evangelicalism and the Socialist revival in Scotland, 1850-1914" in *After Socialism*, ed. Morton, 23-37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-2.

³⁷ Most notably, David Watson (1859-1943). See entry by D.C. Smith in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. N.M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh, 1993), 856. Also, M.A. McCabe, "'Luther's Blunder': David Watson, Social Christianity and Evangelical Individualism in early Twentieth-Century Scotland" (unpublished B.D. Hons Paper, Edinburgh, 1994).

Church Congresses where discussion of social issues was given a prominent place on the conferences' agendas.³⁸

The first of these Congresses was held in Glasgow in October, 1899.³⁹ Its stated object was – notably – *evangelistic* and did not in fact mention social issues. The Congress was an attempt

to bring together members of the Church of Scotland for free deliberation, and for the exchange of opinion and experience on subjects which affect the practical efficiency of the Church and the means of her defence and extension.⁴⁰

There was no suggestion here that social issues, as part of the broader question of “practical efficiency”, should be separated from the Church’s principal duties – evangelism and extension. This is an important point. Christian social teaching has always been about making individuals, and thence society, Christian. And this is precisely why in the nineteenth century Evangelicalism linked-up with *laissez-faire* individualism; *laissez-faire* individualism was seen as an instrument for evangelisation and for Christianising society. Far too many scholars, following D.C. Smith’s lead, have tried to consider social criticism in the Scottish Churches in the nineteenth century apart from attitudes towards, and thinking about, *mission*. Moreover, they have mistakenly argued that the Church of Scotland in particular failed in its duty to raise a voice of prophetic protest and to produce a radical critique of nineteenth-century society. The implication seems to be that nineteenth-century kirkmen were not true Christians. Yet it has to be said that political economy and the *laissez-faire* individualism that it espoused in the past was a radical social critique.⁴¹ So the 1899 Church Congress was a landmark not because, as Smith has argued, it highlights “the gradual *recovery* of social criticism” in the Established Church, but because it indicates a new

³⁸ For more background on the setting-up of the Congresses see Smith, *Passive Obedience*, 334.

³⁹ In the end, there were three other Congresses: 1901, Aberdeen; 1904, Edinburgh; 1907, Dundee.

⁴⁰ *First Church Congress, 1899: Official Report* (Edinburgh, 1899), “Object of Church Congress” printed facing titles page.

⁴¹ A point which did not escape the notice of one Margaret Thatcher.

willingness to consider radical alternatives to *laissez-faire*.⁴² Indeed, it could be argued that the Established Church was beginning to recognise that future *evangelisation* might necessitate new and different directions in Christian social teaching from those followed hitherto.

John Glasse was in no doubt that the Kirk's social teaching could not be separated from the duty to evangelise. For him, social teaching sprang from the evangelical imperative. So in the twenty years from 1889, for example, Glasse was a member of the powerful Committee on Home Mission, a committee that dated back to the 1840s, whose *raison d'être* was church extension in the towns and cities.⁴³ It sought to bring public worship and ordinances within reach of all those who, for whatever reason, were outside the Church. At the turn of the century the annual report still began with a robust restatement of evangelical aims:

The purpose for which the Home Mission was established is the supply of the means of grace to populations which have outgrown the parochial system. Its work is distinctively aggressive.... Its great duty is Church extension.... Evangelistic and Pastoral Agencies, and Church Extension ... are the two great spheres in which Home Mission works.⁴⁴

At the first Church Congress in 1899 one whole evening was given over to speakers and discussion focusing on "The Church's Attitude to Social and Economic Movements".⁴⁵ This session was advertised as a public meeting to which working men were "specifically invited".⁴⁶ And it was at this session that Glasse delivered a forthright address on "The Relation of the Church to

⁴² Smith, *Passive Obedience*, 334.

⁴³ See *Reports on the Schemes of the Church of Scotland* for these years. Glasse also sat on the Committee on Social Work from 1904-1909 alongside key spokesman for Social Christianity, David Watson. (The Committee on Social Work was formed in 1904 not least as a result of Watson's hard work.)

⁴⁴ "Report of the Home Mission Committee" in *Reports on the Schemes of the Church of Scotland, 1899*, 294.

⁴⁵ *Church of Scotland Congress, 1899*, vi.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Socialism". By this date Glasse was well-known in Scottish ILP circles so although a report of his address appeared in the published proceedings of the Church Congress a fuller text was issued as an ILP pamphlet early in 1900.

In the Preface to the Pamphlet Glasse summarised his Christian-Socialist *credo* by extensive quotation from the writings of the famous German Christian-Socialist, Christoph Blumhardt,⁴⁷ a Protestant minister in Württemberg:

For many years it has been my conviction that no religion is worth anything that cannot transform society and raise it to a higher and better level, and make men happy here on earth. In this sense I understand the Scriptures, and in that sense I understand my Christ. And, therefore, I feel myself inwardly related to those people who are charged with aiming at Utopia; I am their associate and one with them in spirit. May the time come when money shall not be the measure of all things and of all values, but the life and happiness of men shall be the chief thing.

What we need is a Christian state, with the spirit of Christ controlling all our actions.... Let it not be regarded as astonishing that a man who confesses the Lord Jesus Christ acknowledges his agreement with the ideas of Social Democracy, with the poor working people of the land. For Christ himself was of the lowly. He was a Socialist....⁴⁸

The citation from Blumhardt not only indicates Glasse's familiarity with the Christian-Socialist movement in Wilhelmine Germany, but also highlights two key premises on which his defence and exposition of Socialism rested. First, the traditional Protestant

⁴⁷ Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842-1919). Blumhardt's active sympathy with the plight of the working classes led him into the Württemberg Diet, from 1900-1906, as a member of the Social Democratic Party. This was hugely controversial for many German Lutherans detested the "godlessness" of the Marxist SDP. Blumhardt was forced by the church authorities to resign from his ministry. More on Blumhardt, J.C. Cort, *Christian Socialism* (New York, 1988), 199-201.

⁴⁸ Glasse quoting Blumhardt in J. Glasse, *The Relation of the Church to Socialism* (Edinburgh Branch of the ILP, 1900), 4.

evangelical position that religion ought to transform society to the extent of creating a Christian state. Second, that Jesus of Nazareth was a Socialist so the aims of Socialist parties can best be realised in accordance with Christ's teachings.

Prophet

From the later 1880s Glasse joined in the debate among Socialists about ideological definitions and about strategies that would bring the transformation to a Socialist society. He was optimistic and confident that Socialism could and would succeed.

His writings in the 1900s indicate that he had explored a number of Socialist positions before opting for ILP ethicism, Fabian gradualism and for the parliamentary route to radical social change. He appreciated the difficulties of arriving at one single adequate definition of Socialism and one single strategy that would suit all Socialists and he recognised that disunity was an ever-present threat to Socialist solidarity because of this.⁴⁹

Yet by 1900 he was clear in his mind about what Socialism was not. It was not anarchism or the destruction of capitalism through violent revolution.⁵⁰ Nor was it syndicalism (although trade unions were necessary for the emancipation of labour and were Socialists' natural allies).⁵¹ And though it was idealistic, Socialism did not rest on the "artificialities" of Saint-Simon's utopianism.⁵² The work of Marx, said Glasse, had "effectually removed from Socialism the reproach of artificiality".⁵³ Marx had pushed Socialism "in the direction of sanity" because he had shown it to be scientific.⁵⁴

There is no doubt that Glasse was influenced by Marx, but he was not a Marxist and it is exaggeration to say, as Callum Brown does, that Glasse was "a devotee" of Marx.⁵⁵ Indeed, after an initial flirtation with Marxism Glasse became highly critical of it.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7, 15-16.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Brown, *Social History*, 191.

First, he argued, Marx had “glorified material as opposed to moral forces”.⁵⁶ Second, Marxist determinism made for a Socialism that was “too simply fatalistic” and too reminiscent of “Calvinist fatalism”, which he deplored.⁵⁷ Third, Marxist fatalism led to a mistaken emphasis on the inevitability of, and necessity for, class war.⁵⁸

For Glasse, as for Keir Hardie, class war reduced Socialism to a mere faction fight.⁵⁹ Indeed, the factionalism promoted by and within the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (in Edinburgh and nationally) served to convince Glasse that in practice Marxism was a dead end. The SDF, he said, was “too theoretical and uncompromising”, its members addicted to “catastrophe” scenarios.⁶⁰ The membership was small in number and would remain so because it was sectarian. Socialists had to be pragmatic and in the British context this meant recognising that Socialism could only be achieved through the constitutional processes of parliamentary democracy. By contrast, the SDF:

lives in the expectation of a crisis by the improvement of which the country will be captured for Socialism and secure at once the public ownership of the means of production. This is a dream. All experience assures us that such a change must be gradual, and in every country with representative government it will be constitutional.⁶¹

By identifying Socialism exclusively with Marxism the SDF condemned itself to ineffectualness. The Socialist movement should not be committed to the “infallibility” of Marx.⁶² Where this had happened, as it had in the German Social Democratic Party, the progress of Socialism was being hindered. Agreeing with Fabian

⁵⁶ Glasse, *The Relation*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁹ Much the best work on Keir Hardie and his Socialism remains K.O. Morgan. *Keir Hardie: Radical and Socialist* (London, 1975 – reissued London, 1997). Glasse was clearly deeply impressed by Keir Hardie.

⁶⁰ Glasse, *The Relation*, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 13.

criticisms of the German Social Democrats, Glasse argued that people could be Socialists without accepting Marxist dialectics, the labour theory of value or the materialistic conception of history.⁶³ Concern for “distant ends”⁶⁴ was no substitute for action to build-up the movement of the present:

The attainment of the political and economic rights of the workers is our immediate purpose – universal suffrage, and the development of municipal activity. Until there is a better educated, better equipped working class nothing much can be done. Each improvement in the condition of labour is to be welcomed and fostered. Socialism will come from the growth of national wealth, not through misery and the bankruptcy courts.⁶⁵

(The hallmarks of radical Liberalism are much in evidence here.)

Glasse acknowledged that Marx had made an important contribution to Socialist theory but he thought Marxists’ obsession with theoretical issues ignored real men and women of flesh and blood. Violent revolution sounded good and glorious, a worthwhile means to an end. In practice it would result in destruction of the very people it was meant to benefit. Certainly, said Glasse, riots might break out from time to time over industrial disputes or during economic depression. But rioting was not essential to Socialism and would do nothing to advance it.⁶⁶ Better to recognise that the success of Socialism depended on “the sober and conservative majority of the community”⁶⁷ who would need to be *convinced* that “private ownership for wealth production fails to render social service and threatens to develop into social tyranny.”⁶⁸ Such a conviction would come slowly and piecemeal so there would be “no expropriation of

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

landlords, no confiscation of capital except by way of taxation, and this must also commend itself to our sense of justice".⁶⁹

Though critical of the Marxist approach, Glasse defended Socialism against those who claimed that it encouraged state intervention and collectivism and so undermined self-help. Such criticisms were "mere figments of the imagination" not least because co-operation – a central aim and value of Socialism – "was the greatest example of self-help in the country".⁷⁰

Glasse's affirmation of co-operative principles was based on his reading of Maurice and Kingsley, and, more important, on his reverence for Robert Owen. Owen was hostile towards the institutional churches but, said Glasse, he had "rescued the teachings of Jesus from perversions begun even in the gospels and perpetuated in the Church."⁷¹ For Owen, religion consisted of "the pursuit of truth and the exercise of charity".⁷² It was "practical rather than speculative".⁷³ Christianity thus interpreted by Owen was "not only the best but the true religion".⁷⁴ Owen had "repudiated the repellent fatalism of Calvinism".⁷⁵ He had made it clear that "a true Christian and a true Socialist were two names for the same thing".⁷⁶

This reading of Owen's religion and admiration for co-operative principles informed Glasse's belief in the values of self-help and working class independence. On these points too Glasse's attitude was in line with that of those ILPers who, like Keir Hardie or Philip Snowden, had broken with the Liberal Party but not from Liberalism; who despite their advocacy of, for instance, common ownership were markedly suspicious of state power and of centralisation.⁷⁷ Other

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷¹ Glasse, *Robert Owen*, 11.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ See K. Laybourn, *The Rise of Labour* (London, 1988); K. Laybourn, *The Rise of Socialism in Britain* (Stroud, 1997); Morgan, *Keir Hardie*.

attitudes to the state were present in the British Socialist movement particularly among Fabians and the Marxists of the SDF. But, as Patrick Joyce points out, even Fabians “set liberal and individualist limits to the role of the state”.⁷⁸ And in the labourism of the trades unions “distrust of the state was very marked”.⁷⁹ Indeed in their attitude to the state, as in conceptions of the economy, class, society and the individual, late Victorian-Edwardian Socialists (at least non-Marxists) had a great deal in common with radical Liberalism. For Glasse, as for Hardie, the realisation of community potential and the realisation of individual potential, social salvation and individual salvation, were complementary. Socialism was not so much about state control as it was about “self-help made possible by the state’s adjustments of the profound inequalities of capitalist society”.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the attitude of the ILP to the state, and Socialist versions of self-help

differed in their collectivist nature from the marked individualism of superficially similar notions present among the middle class and insistently relayed to the poor, not least by certain sections of Liberalism.⁸¹

Glasse put the point as follows: Socialism could not be realised *except* through self-help. Among the working class the Co-operative Movement arose from individuals’ need to help themselves by uniting with others. Recognition of the importance of unity sprang from a realisation that all wealth was a *social* product. Millionaires, such as the Vanderbilts, were continually cited as eminent examples of self-

⁷⁸ P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), 79.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* The connection between Liberalism and Socialist revivalism is one of the key areas of Labour history. The publication on 13 March, 1995 of the current Labour Party’s new statement of aims and values (to replace “Clause IV”) was not, as Tony Blair argued, a defining moment in the party’s history. Rather, it was a resurgence of the radical Liberal tradition which has always been of crucial importance in British non-Marxist Socialist thought. For a recent opinion on the radical Liberal tradition and the Labour Party see Martin Kettle, “Laying Labour’s Ghost with a Liberal Dose” in *Guardian*, March 11, 1995, p. 25.

⁸⁰ Joyce, *Visions of the People*, 79.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

help when in fact the millionaire did not grow rich by his own labour alone:

He organises the labour of others, captures companies, controls the railways, inspires the press, and constrains the government – forcing them all ... to spend their powers in filling his coffers. Self-help thus turns out ... to be a name for using everything and everyone to the profit of oneself; and the only difference ... between an intelligent Plutocrat and an intelligent Socialist is that while the one would reserve to himself the other would return to the community the result of this co-operative effort.... I commend to you the superior ethics of [the latter] position.⁸²

And, said Glasse, it is this view of Socialism as a *moral* system that explains why a Christian can be a Socialist: “The ethic of both is so obviously the same”.⁸³

Furthermore, he denied that Socialism was necessarily materialistic and therefore atheistic. Christians who took this view should realise that most Socialists “had not adopted their religious opinions on account of their Socialism”.⁸⁴ Certainly, some Socialists were atheists or secularists and indifferent or downright hostile to the Churches. “What of it?”, Glasse asked, “I know many Liberals and Conservatives who are in the same position”.⁸⁵ Besides, it was partly the hostility of the Churches to Socialism that persuaded some Socialists that institutional Christianity was, as Marx puts it, capitalism’s spiritualistic *point d’honneur*, its moral sanction and so little more than organised hypocrisy.⁸⁶ Glasse sympathised with this view but noted that all over the world

⁸² Glasse, *The Relation*, 18.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ See K. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law* (1844) in *Marx and Engels On Religion* (Moscow, 1975 edn.), 38-9.

even in meetings where the clergy are denounced, the name of Jesus is received with acclamation and affection. He is looked on as a leader, as a pioneer and a prophet of Socialism.⁸⁷

And why was this? Because “the whole of religion, according to Jesus, may be summed up in love to God *and to one’s neighbour*”.⁸⁸ Some Socialists had difficulty with Christian metaphysics or sacraments or ecclesiastical structures, but that difficulty was not peculiar to them; it was “shared by many both inside and outside our Churches”.⁸⁹ Socialism was not by definition irreligious. On the contrary, it was the Christianity of men like Maurice and Kingsley “that impelled them to Socialism”.⁹⁰ Their Socialism was Christianity cast in a modern context, their denunciations of competition, personal aggrandisement and the human misery caused by unregulated capitalism and selfish individualism were the prophetic utterances of a modern Christian social teaching.

Glasse, too, was outraged by the human costs of capitalism. He was acutely aware of the deprivation among Edinburgh’s poor working class because many of them were crammed in and around the dilapidated streets near Greyfriars: Candlemaker Row, West Port, Cowgate; up onto the High Street, across to the Southside – here were some of the worst slums in the country. So moral indignation, derived from the physical evidence of human catastrophe, and not highblown intellectual theories or theology inspired Glasse’s calls for social justice.⁹¹ It was the same moral outrage, he believed, that Jesus Christ himself had expressed.

Conclusion: John Glasse and the Socialist revival

⁸⁷ Glasse, *The Relation*, 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹¹ Hence his support for the Webbs’ famous *Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws*, 1909. See J. Glasse, *Pauperism in Scotland: Past and Present* (Scottish National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution, Glasgow, 1910), esp. chapter viii “The Minority Report”, 55-61; conclusion, 71-5.

The *sine qua non* of Socialist revivalism in Scotland from c.1890-1914, especially as it was expressed in and by the ILP, was Evangelical Protestantism.⁹² Evangelicalism was the defining context within which late Victorian Socialism in Scotland had been nourished. It informed the methods, style, content and values of the ILPs Socialism. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say that ILP Socialist revivalism was a reorchestration of the radical impulse of Evangelical Presbyterianism. Independent Labour prophecy was not a new ideology. It was sometimes innovatory but was nevertheless firmly located within the matrix of Evangelical-mission culture. (This is *why* it was “the ... Calvinist ILP and not the Marxists” who were dominant in Scottish Socialist revivalism.⁹³) Herein lay some of its strengths, weaknesses and ambiguities. Although a Church of Scotland minister and therefore an unusual figure in the Socialist movement, John Glasse typified Scottish Socialist revivalism

His commitment to the Kirk was never in doubt. He worked from within it, and the Knoxian tradition of prophetic protest and social criticism, to promote the cause of Christian Socialism. Insofar as the dogmas and sacraments of the Church were ethical he believed them to be of interest to Socialism.⁹⁴ The doctrine of the incarnation, for instance, set forth “the Divine Pity for humanity”.⁹⁵ It meant that the Church must operate in and through the world and be concerned as much with earthly as with heavenly matters. And the death of Jesus provided a constant reminder that people should be prepared to lay down even their lives *for others*.⁹⁶ As part of Christ’s Church, the Church of Scotland had a clear social duty outlined in that “keynote

⁹² For a detailed account of this thesis see M.A. McCabe “Evangelicalism and the Socialist revival: A Study of Religion, Community and Culture in Nineteenth Century Airdrie” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1992).

⁹³ W. Knox, “The Political and Workplace Culture of the Scottish Working Class, 1832-1914” in *People and Society in Scotland, Volume II, 1830-1914*, edd. W.H. Fraser and R.J. Morris (Edinburgh 1990), 161.

⁹⁴ Glasse, *The Relation*, 18.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

of the Gospel found in the Magnificat at Luke 1:51-53".⁹⁷ Christian social teaching was inseparable from evangelism but the conversion of individuals was meaningless if they did not have decent living and working conditions. Until the poor and working class were freed from fear "of the quaking morass into whose weltering and bitter waters they may at any moment be pushed by the relentless fingers of disease or the frequent fluctuations of industry" the Church had no right to expect to win their hearts and minds for Christ.⁹⁸ Socialism could set the people free because it was Christianity *applied to industrial society*.

If Glasse seems rather woolly about what this meant in practice that is because he did not want to be seen as a politician or a theoretician. He recognised that Socialism could "not be divorced from politics"⁹⁹ but thought it not the job of ministers to turn Sunday worship into campaigning for any particular political party.¹⁰⁰ In the pulpit ministers ought to be *prophets* rather than partisans.¹⁰¹ They should denounce breaches of Christian principle by or in any government or party for as Christian *citizens* they had a social duty. And that duty included challenging those who argued that there is no relation between economics and ethics. On the contrary, said Glasse, the production and distribution of wealth cannot be discussed without considering the question of justice.¹⁰² Christianity demanded justice, righteousness and mercy whereas industry "has found ample opportunity for cruelty and oppression. But we are ... to do to others what we would like done to ourselves".¹⁰³ This simple Judeo-Christian principle was at the core of Glasse's commitment to Socialism.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3. Luke 1:51-53 (Authorised Version): "⁵¹He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. ⁵²He hath put down the mighty from *their* seats, and exalted them of low degree. ⁵³He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away."

⁹⁸ Glasse, *Pauperism in Scotland*, 75.

⁹⁹ Glasse, *Robert Owen*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Glasse, *The Relation*, 22.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

It was also the basis of the Social Gospel movement in Germany from his contact with which Glasse drew encouragement and optimism. The outbreak of war in 1914 was, then, a crushing blow to his hopes for humanity and to his confidence in the progress on international Socialism. Two months before his death he delivered an address in Edinburgh, published as "The War and Socialism: An Indictment of Germany", in which he expressed bitter disappointment.

The text of the address was issued by the Scottish Socialist Federation which stood for "the prosecution of the war until peace can be established on a permanent and democratic basis".¹⁰⁴ A Vice-President of the SSF, Glasse endorsed this object and so gave his support to the large number of ILPers who were committed to the war effort "either on the negative groups of the need for national defence or on more positive grounds that Prussianism needed to be destroyed".¹⁰⁵ The SSF adopted the latter of these positions¹⁰⁶ and in addition argued that the war could, and should, bring about an extension of Socialism in Britain. It advocated the organisation of the nation in war along Socialist lines (by extending state control and/or state ownership of industry) and the establishment of a policy of post-war reconstruction that would lead to the creation of a Socialist state.¹⁰⁷ By taking this line, the SSF attempted to portray the war as an engine of social change and not simply a bloody, pointless slaughter.

Yet Glasse was unable to conceal his disappointment or, indeed, his nationalism. He blamed Germany for causing the war and accused the German Socialists of "cowardly collapse" and "detestable deception" for supporting their government's actions in 1914.¹⁰⁸ The German Social Democrats had:

failed the world in the day of trial and must remain distrusted and despised by the friends of progress until they redeem their

¹⁰⁴ J. Glasse, "The War and Socialism: An Indictment of Germany" (Edinburgh, 1918), 2.

¹⁰⁵ Laybourn, *The Rise of Socialism*, 76.

¹⁰⁶ Explicitly so. See Glasse, "The War and Socialism", 2.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

reputation by courage and devotion ... [they have] betrayed the cause of international Socialism.¹⁰⁹

There were harsh words too for the pacifist Socialists in Britain, especially J. Ramsay MacDonald. These were Socialists who took themselves more seriously than their country, and were capable, like Nero, of fiddling while Rome was burning.¹¹⁰ Glasse failed to note that British pacifist Socialists or German Social Democrats took up their respective positions with regard to the war on the same grounds as he – love of country and of humanity. Whether or not his comments in ‘The War and Socialism’ were an expression of expediency or naiveté or intellectual dishonesty or self-deception is hard to say. He was not the only Socialist whose rather platitudinous internationalism harboured too many unresolved contradictions and ambiguities to be able to withstand the attractions of nationalism and war.

In any case, internationalism had always been less important in Glasse’s Socialism than concern for the plight of the poor in Scotland. He argued that the Church of Scotland, as the national Church, had a particular duty to remind the better-off that their comfortable lifestyles were gained at other people’s expense:

We are apt, in our comfort, to forget that a third of the population of our large cities is living in the midst of squalor and depravity, damned from their birth by an inheritance of evil and by the indifference of society. They call in their misery for our assistance, and we must help them if they are to rise at all.¹¹¹

This was not to say that material prosperity was the chief end of Christian Socialism or that material prosperity would of itself bring about the Good Society. But unless people could enjoy material well-being free from poverty and deprivation they would never come to

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹¹ Glasse, *The Relation*, 23.

appreciate “the merchandise of wisdom” or that it “is more precious than gold”.¹¹²

John Glasse, Christian Socialist, looked forward to a society where “merit would take the place of money”, where “discontent would disappear”.¹¹³ But, he warned:

so long as we associate our glory with material advantages so long will their possession excite the envy of the covetous, and their splendour be dimmed by the tears of the poor.¹¹⁴

Edinburgh

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ J. Glasse, “The Relation of the Church to Socialism” in Church of Scotland Congress, 1899: Official Report, 104. In the pamphlet version of *The Relation* the phrase “dimmed by the tears of the poor” has been changed to the less effective “dimmed by the privations of the people”. (See Glasse, *The Relation*, [pamphlet] 24).